

Double Take

by Richard Wilson

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The barn turned out to be a spaceship in disguise, and that was only the beginning. Before his strange adventure ended, young Paul Asher found himself going around in circles – very peculiar circles indeed!

PAUL ASHER, 27, men's furnishings buyer, leaned back and let the cloth band be fastened across his chest, just under his armpits. He adjusted his heavy spectacles, closed his eyes for a moment, breathed deeply, and was off.

The semi-darkness was dispelled as he shot out of a tunnel into dazzling sunlight. The high-powered vehicle he was driving purred smoothly as it took the long, rising curve. The road climbed steadily toward the mountaintop city ahead. He looked around to satisfy himself that he was alone in the car.

He wasn't.

The girl was a pretty one. He'd seen her somewhere before, he thought. She was looking insolently at him, her wide red mouth in a half smile. Her dark hair stirred in the breeze coming through the window, next to her, which was open just a slit.

She said: "Just keep going, Sweetheart, as fast as you can." And she patted the oversized pocketbook that lay in her lap.

He pressed down on the accelerator and the car responded with a flow of power. The countryside fell away from the road on either side. Far below he could see a river, winding broadly to the far-off sea. The summer day sent its heat-shimmers across the miniature landscape.

The road curved again. There was the only car he had seen since he'd come out of the tunnel. But now, far ahead, he saw another. It was standing at the side of the road, next to a gate that came down in the manner of one at a railroad crossing. But he knew by its black and white diagonals and by the little sentry hut half hidden behind the other car that it marked the frontier. A man with a rifle on his shoulder stood there. They drew up to it fast, but his foot automatically eased up on the floorboard pedal until the girl spoke sharply.

"Right through it, Sweetheart."

In the rear-view mirror he saw her leaning forward, her face tense.

In a moment it would be time to stop, if he were going to.

Paul Asher hesitated a moment. Then he too leaned forward, the band pressing into his chest. He was breathing heavily. There was an almost inaudible click.

He trod on the accelerator. He had a glimpse of the guard unslinging his rifle from his shoulder and of another man running toward the parked car as his vehicle smashed into the flimsy gate and sent it, cracked and splintered, to the side of the road. He fought the slight wrench of the wheel and sped on. He thought he heard a shot.

"Nice work," the girl said. She seemed to be appraising him as she looked at him. "My name, incidentally, is Naomi."

"Hello," he heard himself saying as he whipped the car around a curve that hid the frontier behind a hill. "You seem to know who I am."

"That I do," she said.

"Then why don't you call me by my name, instead of 'Sweetheart'?"

"That's because I like you, Sweetheart." She was looking out the rear window. "Now just step on the gas, because we've got company."

The car that had been parked near the sentry hut was whipping into view around the curve. It was lighter than his, but it was fast, too. He stepped on it.

NOW THE ROAD had become narrow and twisting. The grade was steep but the surface was good. Abruptly, it entered a forest.

The girl said: "Two more curves. Then you'll see a field and a barn. Off the road and into the barn, fast."

He took the curves with rubber screaming and almost without braking sent the car bumping across the field and into the barn. It was bigger than it had seemed from the outside. As he brought the car to a lurching halt the barn door closed.

Where he had expected to see stalls and milking machines and hay he saw an expanse of metal floor

and monstrous machinery. The barn door which had been a rickety wooden slab from the outside was a gleaming sheet of metal from the inside. It glided silently shut and left no joint or seam to show where there had been an opening.

“Out,” said Naomi.

As they left the car, a flexible metal arm snaked from one of the smooth walls, attached itself to the front bumper of the vehicle, and whisked it into a cubicle which opened to receive it and closed behind it.

A power-driven wheelchair sped up to them. Sitting in it was a fat man of middle age, with pendulous jowls and a totally bald head. His expression was a sardonic scowl.

“You have the plans?” he asked the girl.

“Sweetheart here has them.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the young man said.

“He knows, all right,” the girl said. “He pretends to be innocent, but that is merely his training. He has them under a sticking plaster on the small of his back.”

“Remove your coat and shirt,” commanded the man in the wheelchair.

At that moment the floor shuddered under their feet, a gong began to clang insistently, and the giant machinery, which had been silent, throbbed into life.

The man in the wheelchair whirled and was off, shouting commands to men who materialized high on the walls in cylindrical turrets which the visitor could only think of as battle stations.

“What *is* this place?” he asked.

He got no answer. Instead the girl grabbed his arm and pulled him off to the edge of the gigantic metal room. An opening appeared in the wall and she pushed him through it into a room beyond. The entranceway snapped shut behind them and when he looked he could see no door. The room also was windowless.

Naomi went to a metal table and as she looked down into its surface it became a screen. Mirrored in it was the mountainous countryside they had driven through to get to the barn – or what had seemed to be a barn from the outside. He looked over her shoulder.

They saw as from a height. There was the light car that had chased them from the frontier. Standing near it was a man in an officer’s uniform and another in civilian clothes. They were talking and gesturing. Beside the car was a tank. As they watched, its gun fired and the structure they were in shuddered, but they heard no sound.

Lumbering up the mountain road were more tanks and a self-propelled gun. One of the tanks became enveloped in smoke and flames as they watched. After a moment the smoke cleared. The tank was gone; where it had been there was a deep crater.

Gradually, the figures in the drama below grew smaller. At the same time the vista widened, so that they saw more and more countryside. It twisted beneath them and the horizon came giddily into view. A few moments later the curvature of the earth could be plainly seen.

Everything fitted together at once. Some of the things, anyway.

“We’re in a ship,” he said. “Some kind of rocket-ship.”

“It’s a planet plane,” the girl said. “We’re safe now.”

“Safe from what?” he asked. “What’s this all about?”

She smiled enigmatically. “Hafitz could tell you, if he chose. He’s the boss.”

“The man in the wheelchair?”

She nodded and took out a compact. As she added lipstick to her mouth, she looked him over, between glances in her mirror.

“You don’t look like the spy type. If there is a type.”

“I’m not a spy. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The innocent! Go on, take off your coat and shirt. We’ll save Hafitz some time.”

“I’ll be glad to, just to prove this is all ridiculous. A case of mistaken identity. You’ve made a mistake, that’s what you’ve done.”

He stood there, hesitating.

The girl gave a burst of laughter. Then she said: “All right, Sweetheart. I’ll turn my back.”

She did, and he pulled his shirt out of his trousers. Then he froze. Taped to the skin of his back was a flat package.

Paul Asher made the decision. He bent forward, feeling perspiration in the palms of his hands. There was a faint click.

QUICKLY he ripped the adhesive from his back. There was an instant of pain as the plaster came free. He wadded up the sticky package, dropped it to the floor and kicked it under the desk.

Then he took off his coat, tie and shirt.

“You can turn around now,” he said.

“A more modest spy I’ve never seen. Okay,” she said, “now *you* turn around.”

“As you see,” he said, “there are no plans – no papers.”

“No – not now. But there is a red mark on your back. What is it?”

“Oh,” he said. “Oh – that’s a birthmark.”

She spun him around to face her. Her face was harsh. She slapped his cheek. “Where is the sticking plaster? Don’t trifle with me.”

Her eyes bored into his. He returned the gaze, then shrugged.

“Under the desk,” he said. “I tore it off and kicked it under the desk.”

“You are sensible to confess,” she said.

She bent down, unwisely.

Paul Asher felt the familiar tightening in his chest as he leaned forward. The click was barely heard.

He raised his hand and brought the edge of it down hard on the back of her neck.

She crumpled and fell to the metal floor. He noticed that a smear of her freshly-applied lipstick came off on it.

He pushed the unconscious body aside and fished the packet out from under the desk. He searched the room for another hiding place.

But it was too late. A section of wall opened and Hafitz, the fat man in the wheelchair, sped in.

He wheeled past the young man, looked briefly at the unconscious girl, then whisked himself around.

“You will pay for this, my friend,” he said. “But first we will have the plans for the way-station. Where are they?”

“I don’t know anything about any plans and I don’t know anything about a way-station. I tried to tell the girl: it’s all a crazy mistake.”

“We will see,” said Hafitz. He pressed a button on the arm of his wheelchair and two bruisers appeared through the walls, in the abrupt way people had of materializing here. Bruisers was the only way they could be described. They were human brutes, all muscle and malevolence.

“Take them,” said Hafitz, indicating the unconscious girl and the young man. “Take them and search them for a small packet. If you do not find it, search this room. If you do not find it still, hurt the male animal. They persuade well with pain here, I understand. But do not kill him. I will be in the communications room.”

He sped off, through a wall opening.

One of the bruisers picked up the girl, roughly, and disappeared with her. The other grabbed the young man and hauled him off in a third direction. The young man hastily snatched up his coat, shirt and tie en route.

They ended up in a cell of a room, about seven feet in all directions, in which the bruiser stripped him, methodically went through each piece of clothing, and then satisfied himself that he didn’t have the packet anywhere on his body.

The muscle-man then raised a fist.

“Wait,” his prospective victim said. He thought back quickly. “Hafitz didn’t say you could bat me around till you searched the room, too.”

The other spoke for the first time. “You say the truth.” He put his arm down.

The young man watched intently as the bruiser went through the wall of the cell-like room.

He dressed fast. By placing his fingers in exactly the same position as the other had done, was able to make the wall open for him.

The silver-metal corridor had two directions. He went to the right. After many turnings, at each of which he reconnoitered carefully, he came to a passageway that was damp. Why it was damp he couldn’t tell, but there in the wetness were tracks which could have been made by a wheelchair.

He followed them, feeling the throb of giant engines underfoot.



Figure 1: Illustration by Paul Orban

THE WHEELCHAIR tracks abruptly made a ninety-degree turn and ended at a blank wall. Somewhere beyond it must be the communications room.

He retreated and waited.

In time the wall snapped open and Hafitz sped out. The young man retreated into the maze of corridors and hoped chance would be on his side. It was. Hafitz went another way.

The young man ran back to the wall and used his fingers on it in the combination he had learned. It opened for him.

He closed it behind him and blinked at the huge instrument panel which filled almost the entire room.

One of the instruments was a color vision screen, tuned in to a room in which there was a mahogany desk, at which was seated a man in uniform. Behind him was a map of the United States.

The man in uniform was a major general in the Air Force. An aide, a lieutenant colonel, was leaning over the desk. He had a sheaf of papers in his hand. The men's conversation was audible.

"Messages have been coming in from all over Europe," the colonel was saying. "Here's the way it reconstructs:

"Our agent was en route to the rendezvous when he was intercepted by Naomi. That's the only name we have for her. She's a spy. She's worked for half a dozen countries and her present employer could be any one of them. They were spotted as they crossed the frontier between Italy and France. Their car went into a barn and we thought we had them. But the barn turned out to be a spaceship in disguise. It took off."

So I'm their agent, Paul Asher thought. So that's what it's all about. I'm a secret agent for the United States, but they didn't tell me anything about it. This is real George, this is ... He expected to hear a faint click and leaned forward experimentally, but nothing happened. He leaned backward. Still nothing.

The colonel was answering a question from the general. "We don't know who they are, Sir. They're not from Earth, obviously. And the best scientific minds go still further – they're not even from our solar system. Whoever they are, it's clear that they don't want us to build a way-station in space."

"Those spaceships started buzzing around right after our first Moon trip," the general said. "This is the first time they've become really troublesome – now that we've got the Moon under control and are ready to build the way-station so we can get to Mars."

"That's right, Sir," said the colonel.

"Progress is a wonderful thing," said the general. "Things certainly have changed since those early days of strategic atomic bombing and guided missile experiments."

"Yes, Sir," said the colonel.

The young man in the communications room of the spaceship let his attention wander away from the scene back on Earth and experimented with some of the switches and controls. Trial and error led him to one which lit up a signal on the desk of the general.

The general flicked it on.

“Yes?” he said. He looked puzzled when he got no picture, just a voice saying, “Hello, hello.”

“Yes?” he said. “Hello. Speak up, man.”

“This is your agent aboard the enemy spaceship,” said the young man. “Do you read me?”

“Yes,” said the general. “We read you. Go ahead.”

“I may not have much time. Get a fix on me if you can. And send help.”

“What’s your position?” the general was reacting well. He was alert and all business.

“I don’t know. I’ve been taken prisoner, but I’m temporarily free. There isn’t much time. Hafitz is bound to be back soon. He seems to be the brains of this outfit – this part of the outfit, anyway. Naomi is here, too, but I don’t know whether she’s with them or against them.”

“Where are the plans, son?” asked the general.

“They’re safe, for the moment. I can’t guarantee for how long.”

“I’m getting the fix,” the colonel said. He was beyond the range of the young man’s vision screen. “I’ve got him. He’s still within range, but accelerating fast. We can intercept if we get up a rocket soon enough.”

“Get it up,” ordered the general. “Get up a squadron. Scramble the Moon patrol and send out reserves from Earth at once.”

“Right!” said the colonel.

The young man was so engrossed in the makings of his rescue party that he didn’t see the wall open up behind him.

There was a squeak of rubber tires and he whirled to see Hafitz, in his wheelchair, slamming toward him. The fat man’s hand held a weird-looking gun.

The young man recoiled. His back pushed against a row of control buttons.

Then everything went white.

PAUL ASHER blinked his eyes, like a man awakening from a vivid dream.

The house lights went on and the manager of the theater came on the stage. He stood in front of the blank master screen with its checkerboard pattern of smaller screens, on which the several lines of action had taken place simultaneously. Paul took

off his selectorscope spectacles with the earphone attachments.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the manager said. “I regret very much having to announce that this vicarion of the production *Spies from Space* was defective. The multifilm has broken and, because of the complexity of the vokie process, it will be impossible to splice it without returning it to the laboratory.

“Ushers are at the exits with passes good for any future performance. Those of you who prefer can exchange them at the box office for a full refund of your admission price.”

Paul Asher unstrapped the wired canvas band from across his chest. He put the selectorscope spectacles into the pouch on the arm of the seat and walked out of the R.K.O. Vicarion into High Street and around the corner to where his car was parked.

His roommate at the communapt, MacCloy, was still up when he got there, going over some projectos. Mac snapped off the screen and quickly swept the slides together and into a case.

“You’re back early,” MacCloy said.

“The multifilm broke,” Paul told him.

“Oh.” Mac seemed abstracted, as he often did, and again Paul wondered about this man he knew so casually and who had never confided in him about anything – especially about his government job.

“So I missed the ending,” Paul said. “I guess it was near the end, anyhow. The space patrol was on the way, but the villain, that Hafitz, was just about to blast me with his gun and I don’t know how I would have got out of that.”

“I remember that,” Mac said. He laughed. “You must have been Positive all the way through. Like I was when I saw it. If you’d had any negative reactions – if you’d leaned back against the strap instead of forward – you’d have been at some other point in the multiplot and I wouldn’t have recognized that part. Want me to tell you how it ends?”

“Go ahead. Then if I do see it again I’ll change the ending somewhere along the line with a lean-back.”

“Okay. There really wasn’t much more. It takes so much film to provide all the plot choices that they can’t make them very long.

“Well, Hafitz blasts me and misses,” Mac went on, “– or blasts *you* and misses, to keep it in your viewpoint. When you jump back, you set off a bunch

of controls. That was the control room, too, not just the communications room. Well, those controls you lean back against take the ship out of automatic pilot and send it into some wild acrobatics and that's why Hafitz misses. Also it knocks him out of the wheelchair so he's helpless and you get his gun. Also you see that the plans are still there – right where you put them, stuck to the bottom of his wheelchair.”

“So that was it,” said Paul.

“Yes,” said Mac. “And then you cover Hafitz while he straightens out the ship and you rendezvous with the space control and they take you all into custody. You get a citation from the government. That's about it. Corny, huh?”

“But what about the girl?” Paul asked. “Is she really a spy?”

“Girl? What girl?”

“Naomi, her name was,” Paul said. “You couldn't miss her. She was in the vokie right at the beginning – that brunette in the fast car.”

“But there wasn't any girl, Paul,” Mac insisted. “Not when I saw it.”

“Of course there was. There had to be – the vokies all start out the same way, no matter who sees them.”

“It beats me, pal. I know I didn't see her. Maybe you dreamed up the dame.”

“I don't think so,” Paul said. “But of course it's possible.” He yawned. “I wouldn't mind dreaming of her tonight, at that. Think I'll turn in now, Mac. I've got that long trip tomorrow, you know. Up to Canada to look over a new line of Marswool sport jackets at the All-Planets Showroom.”

“Driving or flying?”

“The weather prognosis is zero-zero. I'll drive.”

“Good,” said Mac.

PAUL ASHER woke up late. He had a confused recollection of a dream. Something about a beautiful brunette giving him a backrub.

A look at the chrono sent the dream out of his head and he hurried through shaving and dressing.

His car was waiting for him, engine idling, at the curb. He got in, tossing his briefcase and topcoat ahead of him to the far side of the front seat. His

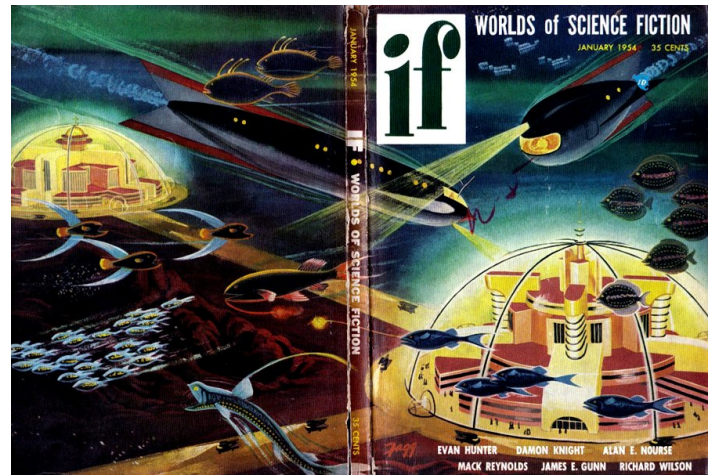


Figure 2: Cover of *If Worlds of Science Fiction* January 1954

back began to itch, insistently, and he rubbed it against the leather upholstery.

Paul adjusted the safety belt around him, and fastened it. Might as well do it now, instead of having to fool around with it later. Damn that itch, anyway! It was as if something were stuck to his skin – like a sticking plaster....

The high-powered vehicle purred smoothly as it took a long, rising curve. The road climbed steadily toward the mountaintop city ahead.

The scene was familiar.

The itching of his back spread and became a prickly feeling in the small hairs at the nape of his neck.

He knew now that he was not alone in the car. He looked in the rear-view mirror.

Naomi.

She was looking at him insolently, her wide red mouth in a half smile.

She said: “Just keep going, Sweetheart, as fast as you can.”

... THE END

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *If Worlds of Science Fiction* January 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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